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ABSTRACT

This issue brief looks at the relationship between gang presence in schools and students' reports of victimization and fear. There is limited data about the causes of either juvenile street violence or school-related crime. Data collected in 1989 and 1993 reveal: (1) minority students living in urban areas are not the only ones who attend schools with gang members--similar numbers of white students and minority students report gangs in their schools; (2) gang presence in schools is strongly associated with increased student reports of victimization and fear; and (3) when gang presence is taken into account, differences in victimization and fear levels decrease between students living in rural, suburban, and urban areas. Three tables present student-reported data on gang presence and experiences of victimization and fear. (JBJ)

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

EDUCATION POLICY ISSUES: STATISTICAL PERSPECTIVES

Gangs and Victimization at School

July 1995

The NCES Education Policy Issues series is designed to provide the best statistical information available on important policy questions. The series primarily provides responses grounded in statistical findings, but also, as appropriate, provides some information based on smaller scale research and case studies.

Public concern over violent juvenile behavior has intensified in recent years, especially in regard to safety inside schools. Included among the National Education Goals is a strong commitment to providing children with learning environments that are free of violence. Yet there are very limited data about the causes of either juvenile street violence or school-related crime. Journalists frequently blame street violence on the influence of gangs. This issue brief looks at the relationship between gang presence in schools and students' reports of victimization and fear. Data collected in 1989 and 1993 reveal:

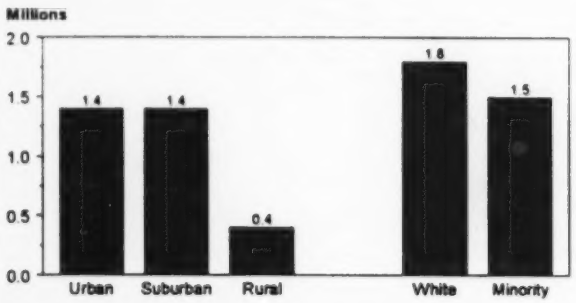
- Minority students living in urban areas are not the only ones who attend schools with gang members. Similar numbers of white students and minority students report gangs in their schools. Also, similar numbers of students living in suburban neighborhoods and students living in urban neighborhoods report gangs in their schools.
- Gang presence in schools is strongly associated with increased student reports of victimization and fear.
- When gang presence is taken into account, differences in victimization and fear levels decrease between students living in rural, suburban, and urban areas.

Which students are exposed to gangs at school?

In 1989, 15 percent of students (approximately 3,301,000) reported "street" gangs in their school.[1] By 1993, in a different survey, 35 percent of students said "fighting" gangs were present in their schools.[2] Although the data from these two surveys can not be compared directly due to the different wording of the gangs question, these data may signal an increase in the number of students exposed to gangs.

Many people assume that gangs are confined to urban areas and schools with large concentrations of minority students. The 1989 survey, which asked students whether there were street gangs at their school, found that while the proportion of students reporting gangs was higher in urban areas (27%) than in suburban (15%) or rural areas (8%), the *number* of students in both suburban areas and urban areas who reported attending schools with gangs was roughly equivalent at 1.4 million each.[3] (See figure 1.) In short, gangs are not just an urban-school problem.

Figure 1. Students reporting gangs in school, by students' residence and minority status



SOURCE: 1989 National Crime Victimization Survey

Exposure to gangs is also viewed primarily as a problem for minority youth, despite that students from all backgrounds report gangs in their schools. In 1989, one in three Hispanic students reported members of street gangs were enrolled in their school (34%). Black students and white students were less likely to report gang members present in their school (21% and 12% respectively). Yet, because the school population of white students is much larger than that of other groups, more white students than minority students are estimated to report a gang presence in their school (in 1989, 1.8 million white students compared to 1.5 million minority students when all minority students are combined as shown in figure 1).[4]

Analyses of 1993 data by race and ethnicity find similar patterns. In 1993, while the proportion of white students reporting the presence of fighting gangs in their school (31%) was less than that of black (42%) and Hispanic students (51%), the *number* of white students exposed to gangs at school (5.2 million) was nearly two million more than the number of minority students combined (3.2 million) exposed to gangs at school.[5]

[1] Based on the 1989 School Crime Supplement to the annual National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (U.S. Department of Justice). NCVS surveyed 10,499 students, ages 12 to 19, and is a nationally representative sample of households in the United States. Students were asked "Are there any street gangs at your school?"

[2] Based on the School Safety and Discipline Survey conducted as part of the 1993 National Household Education Survey (NHES), administered by the National Center for Education Statistics. NHES surveyed 6,800 students in grades 6 through 12 and 13,300 parents and is a nationally representative sample of households in the United States. Students were asked "Do any of the students at your school belong to fighting gangs?"

[3] NCVS, 1989. Residential areas are based on Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) classifications. Suburbs are inside an MSA, but not in the central city of the MSA. Rural areas are all outside MSA's.

[4] NCVS, 1989.

[5] NHES, 1993.

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Are schools with gangs likely to have higher rates of victimization and fear?[6]

Overall, in 1989, 15 percent of students feared an attack on their way to or from school and an even greater percentage (22%) feared an attack while at school. A much smaller percentage (4%) said they had actually been victimized in the last six months.

Reported rates of fear and victimization varied by whether gangs were present in the school. Students at schools with gangs consistently reported much higher victimization rates and levels of fear than students at schools without gangs (table 1). Compared to students who did not report gangs in their schools, students who did were: nearly twice as likely to fear an attack at school; more than twice as likely to fear an attack while traveling to or from school; and more than twice as likely to have been victimized within the past six months. The overall proportion of students reporting they avoided certain areas within school (6%) or carried a weapon to school (2%) is roughly comparable to the proportion who reported being victimized in the past six months (4%), and again the pattern of gang related victimization and fear is the same. Students attending schools with gangs were more than four times as likely to avoid certain areas within their school and more than three times as likely to report that they had brought something to school for protection in the last six months.

Table 1. Student victimization and fear at school, by gang presence and students' residence: 1989

Presence of gangs at school and students' residence	Victimization in last 6 months*	Ever fearing an attack: At school	Ever fearing an attack: To or from school	Avoiding places inside school	Brought something to school for protection in last 6 months
Total	3.5%	21.8%	14.7%	5.9%	2.0%
Gangs present	**8.7**	**35.4**	**24.2**	**13.0**	**4.9**
Urban	6.5	37.5	28.4	13.5	5.5
Suburban	6.8	32.4	19.6	13.0	5.1
Rural	6.9	38.0	25.3	13.0	1.9
No gangs	**2.9**	**18.2**	**11.6**	**2.9**	**1.5**
Urban	3.0	19.3	16.3	3.7	2.0
Suburban	3.0	18.1	11.0	2.6	1.4
Rural	2.6	17.5	8.9	2.9	1.1

* Victimization comprises the number of students who answered "yes" to either of two questions: "During the past six months, did anyone take money or things directly from you by force, weapons, or threats at school?" or "Did anyone physically attack you at school during the last six months?"

SOURCE: 1989 National Crime Victimization Survey

These 1989 results are consistent with 1993 data, also based on measures of student-reported victimization and student reports of having "brought a weapon to school" (table 2). As in 1989 data, the proportion of students affected is small, but the relationship of victimization and weapons-carrying to gang presence in the schools is clear. Students attending schools where fighting gangs were present reported much higher rates of victimization and weapons-carrying than other students. Students in schools with gangs were over three times more likely to report having something forcibly taken from them (over the course of the school year), more than three times as likely to report bringing a weapon to school, and more than twice as likely to report being physically attacked. Though the data indicate that gang presence is related to levels of student victimization and fear, these data do not tell us whether an already violent school climate fosters gang membership or whether gangs themselves are the culprit.

Table 2. Student victimization and fear at school, by gang presence and race/ethnicity: 1993

Presence of gangs at school and student race/ethnicity	Physically attacked during school year	Something taken by force	Brought weapon to school
Total*	3.7%	1.2%	3.4%
Gangs	**5.9**	**2.3**	**6.2**
White	5.5	2.3	4.6
Black	8.2	1.9	10.4
Hispanic	4.9	2.6	6.7
No gangs	**2.5**	**0.7**	**1.9**
White	2.5	0.5	1.5
Black	2.1	1.0	4.0
Hispanic	3.0	1.8	1.9

*Total includes racial/ethnic subgroups not shown separately

SOURCE: 1993 National Household Education Survey

Does gang presence outweigh where students live and student race/ethnicity in accounting for levels of student victimization and fear?

All students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or place of residence, tend to report higher rates of victimization and fear when there are gangs in school. For example, in 1989, whether they lived in an urban, suburban, or rural area, roughly 7 percent of students in *schools with gangs* reported they were victimized within the last six months (table 1). Also, differences in students' reported rates of victimization varied little by urban status in *schools without gangs*—roughly 3% of the students reported victimization. Based on statistical tests of the 1989 data that simultaneously take into account where students lived and whether they attended a school with gangs, the likelihood of becoming a victim of violence at school was less related to place of residence than to whether the student attended a school where there were gangs. Similarly, based on statistical tests of the 1993 data that simultaneously take into account students' racial or ethnic background and whether they attended a school with gangs, the likelihood of becoming a victim of violence at school was less related to student background than to whether the student attended a school where there were gangs.

Conclusion

The problem of gangs in schools is limited to neither urban areas nor minority students—the actual number of students who encounter gangs in school is as great for suburban or white students as it is for urban or minority students. Gang presence, not a student's race or ethnicity nor whether the student lives in an urban area, accounts for most of the differences across students who report different levels of victimization and fear at school. When gang presence is factored in, urban and racial differences tend to become insignificant.

[6] See definition of victimization in table 1.

This brief was prepared by John H. Ralph, NCES; Kelly W. Colopy and Christine McRae, Policy Studies Associates; Bruce Daniel, Pinkerton Computer Consultants, Inc. For more information on school violence issues, contact John Ralph, (202) 219-2270 or see Ralph, J.H., D.D. Nelson, L.T. Ogle, *School Violence and Misbehavior: What National Surveys Tell Us*, National Center for Education Statistics, forthcoming.

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